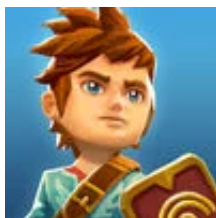
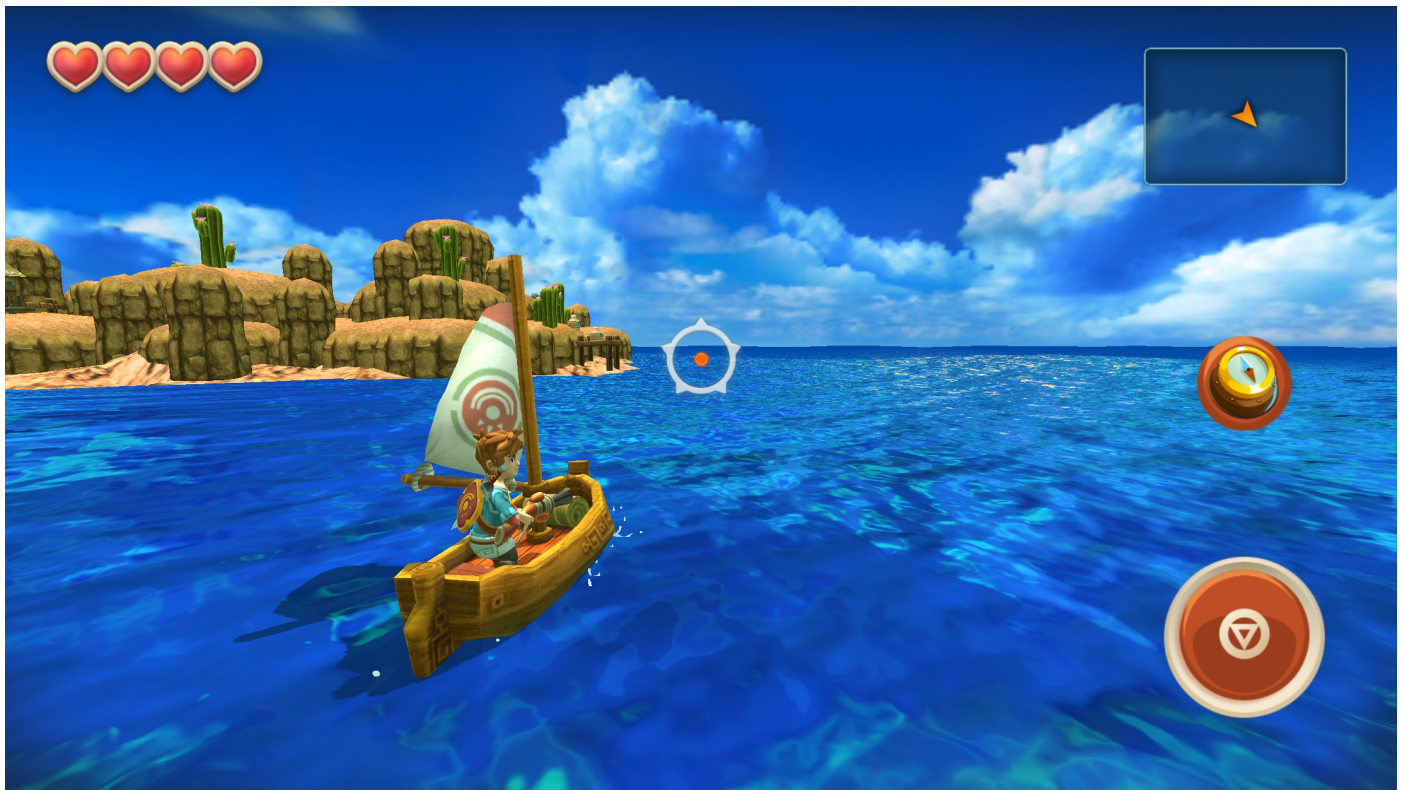


# RPG Reload File 072 – ‘Oceanhorn’

[March 10, 2016](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we smash our neighbor's jars looking for pennies. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up in the here and now. It's an opportunity to revisit old favorites, to reflect on a game's position in the overarching scheme of things, or simply to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow for. As the person holding the magical baton, I try to choose a good balance of games to feature from week to week, but if you feel like I've missed something important, please let me know. You can make suggestions by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#) in the forums, or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). The schedule is planned fairly far in advance, so you probably won't see your suggestion soon, but it will get added to the master list.



This week, we're taking a look at a game that almost forces me to answer a question I generally refuse to answer. *Oceanhorn* ([\\$6.99](#)), from FDG Entertainment and Cornfox & Bros., is a game that bites very heavily off of Nintendo's *The Legend Of Zelda* in almost every way possible. Therefore, by featuring the game, I'd have to be choosing a side in the age-old debate of whether or not *Zelda* is an RPG. Luckily for me, one of the few things *Oceanhorn* does differently is in adding a leveling system with experience points, so I can safely call this game an RPG and escape answering that other question for yet another day. Phew!

To be frank with you, friends, *Oceanhorn* gives me conflicted feelings about its existence and the nature of the mobile market, more so than just about any other iOS game. The developers have made no attempts to hide the game's inspirations and reason to be. They saw a hole in the iOS market for a quality *Legend Of Zelda*-style game, thought they'd like to make a game like that, and went for it. The result is something closer to a proper *Zelda* game than we're likely to ever see again barring some unexpected action on Nintendo's part. At the same time, it's close enough to invite direct comparisons to its source, and it doesn't hold up very well in that light. For a

sub-\$10 game from a three-person team, however, it's incredible that they even hit anywhere near the mark. Is it okay that it borrows so much from *Zelda*, though? Is it acceptable that it basically sold itself on that point, to great success? Would this game have been okay by the standards of other markets? I wrestle with these questions.

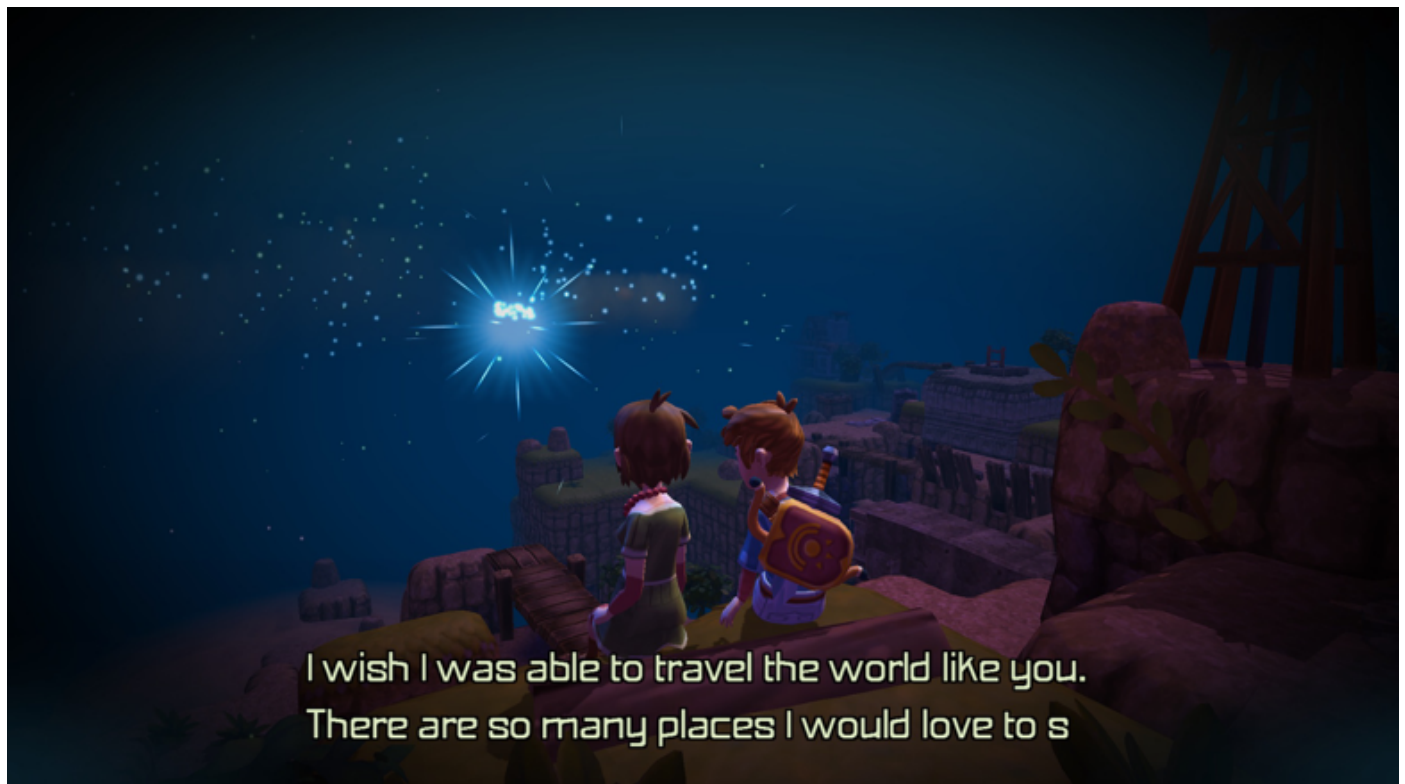


One thing I can clearly say is that within the confines of the iOS ecosystem, *Oceanhorn* is an amazing game. There aren't a ton of *Zelda*-like games on the platform, with most iOS action-RPGs skewing more towards the action-heavy styles of Falcom's *Ys* or Square's *Mana* games. *Oceanhorn* follows *Zelda*'s structure and rhythm to a tee. You'll do plenty of fighting, but it's nowhere near the main point of the game, really only worth paying attention to in the boss battles. Instead, it's more about navigating mazes, searching for keys to unlock doors, solving block-pushing puzzles, finding new weapons or items that also work as keys, and sniffing out secrets to get some extra coins or heart pieces. It doesn't have many new ideas as far as that's all concerned, but it executes the familiar quite well. While the art design of the game is also pretty clearly drawn from *The Legend Of Zelda*, specifically *Wind Waker* and other Toon Link titles, the production values are



off the charts by mobile standards. Thanks to diligent updates on the part of the developer, *Oceanhorn* is still a game worth pulling out to show off your latest iOS hardware to people.

I think the most important thing *Oceanhorn* does well is that it delivers a lengthy, full experience with very few compromises. Most developers that take on the idea of imitating *Zelda* soon discover it's a far bigger job than it may initially appear to be, and end up releasing a game that either finishes quickly or focuses on a particular aspect of the gameplay instead of going for the whole package. The only concession *Oceanhorn* has made is to have the sea travel follow rails rather than give the player full control, resulting in an overworld more akin to the somewhat-maligned *Legend Of Zelda: Spirit Tracks* as opposed to the freedom afforded by most of the series. Aside from that point, which came about due to its addition coming relatively late in the development process, *Oceanhorn* possesses everything it should, and in respectable quantities, to boot. Its approximate 15 hours of gameplay puts it at around the same length as the average handheld installment of *The Legend Of Zelda*.



Again, it's especially remarkable that all of this was done for a mobile-first, \$8.99 game largely made by three people. Cornfox & Bros. is a Finnish developer formed by three men who formerly worked together at another studio. That studio, Universomo, had been acquired by THQ at some point in the past, but THQ's well-publicized financial troubles led to them liquidating the studio in 2010. Brothers Jukaa Viljamaa and Antti Viljamaa decided to join up with their co-worker Heikki Repo to create their own development studio, and that's when the planning for *Oceanhorn* began. Not long after Cornfox & Bros. was formed, they got the opportunity to work on *Death Rally* for Remedy, and *Oceanhorn* was put aside for the time being. After finishing work on that game, they came back to their *Oceanhorn* concept, announcing it in the TouchArcade forums in November of 2011 with plans to launch the game in the following year.

After a couple more updates, things went a bit quiet on *Oceanhorn* for several months. It seemed clear the game wasn't going to make its planned 2012 release date, but there was some good news late in the year. Cornfox & Bros. had hooked up with FDG Entertainment to help them bring the game to the finish line in the best possible form. With the three main members of Cornfox busy just making the game, FDG had to handle the QA. They also offered a lot of suggestions for improving the game, like making the sailing bits interactive. And of course, having FDG's name attached gave people some assurance that the game would eventually release. A mix-up by the developer led to [an alpha version being released](#) on the App Store in March of 2013, but it was pulled before too many people could get their hands on it. The early state of the game had plenty of people wondering just how far away from being finished *Oceanhorn* really was. Fortunately, the following month, TouchArcade's own Jared Nelson and Eli Hodapp [got to put hands on a more current version](#) at GDC 2013.



Still, there was no sign of a release date for the game, and people were definitely starting to get antsy. As the spring gave way to summer, the only new information was the admittedly big news that FDG Entertainment [had signed on two famous Japanese composers](#) to contribute to the game's soundtrack. Nobuo Uematsu, the main *Final Fantasy* composer for most of the series, and Kenji Ito, who had worked on several of the *Mana* series games, both joined the project to add a few songs to the game. By this point, it seemed that the game was heading for a late 2013 release, but a teaser released by the publisher in August of 2013 made it seem like it would be even sooner, declaring a Fall 2013 release for the game. *Oceanhorn* ended up slipping past that window, but only just barely. After a final tease in October, the game released on November 14th, 2013 to a welcoming reception from the media and players alike. The game did well enough that FDG Entertainment said more content would be coming, either as an add-on or in the form of a sequel.

It ended up being the former. Not long after the game's March 17th PC release was in the rear-view mirror, Cornfox began teasing additional content on its blog. FDG made it official in June of 2014, announcing that *Oceanhorn*



would be getting a special Game Of The Year edition as a free update later that summer. That update [finally arrived in August](#), adding four hours of additional content to the game, along with a fishing mini-game and some major graphical enhancements for those with newer hardware. The game received a number of other updates as well, with the last one hitting only a little over a week ago. While no new content has been added outside of the Game Of The Year stuff, many features such as iCloud support, MFi controller support, Apple TV support, and improved visuals for newer hardware devices like iPhone 6S and iPad Pro have been implemented via these smaller updates.



So yes, when it comes to iOS games, *Oceanhorn* is absolutely top-notch, and perhaps one of the most worthwhile pick-ups you can make in the action-RPG category, particularly if you're looking for something that isn't a port of an existing title. It's big, beautiful, and full of reasonably well-executed gameplay that really does feel like a lost cousin of *Zelda*. It's a lot of fun to replay, too, albeit extremely aggravating when you realize you can't hop gaps until you get the shoes again. Many of its gameplay flaws are simply ported over from the games it's aping, such as having to backtrack a

little too often, or the anti-climactic treasure chests that hold only coins or consumable items. But it has a few issues of its own, and if we do the natural thing and compare it to *Zelda*, it understandably doesn't fare as well. A small developer isn't going to be able to match up to a relatively large team composed of some of the best and brightest in the entire game industry, and certainly not for an \$8.99 game. So take the following bits as you will.

If I were to stack *Oceanhorn* up against the *Zelda* games, I think I'd put it below all of the main single-player games save perhaps *Spirit Tracks*. That game has a lot of interesting ideas but it doesn't flow nearly as well as the other *Zelda* games, and even *Oceanhorn's* sometimes-off pacing is better. The combat in *Oceanhorn* doesn't quite click. You can either get in close and try to fumble around with your sword, which is safe enough for many enemies, or you can just side-step the whole thing and bomb everyone and everything. Seriously, once you get the bombs, there's almost no incentive to use any other offensive tool. The bombs are plentiful, and you can often replenish them just by slashing bushes or beating enemies, and they take almost all of the guesswork out of any fight. It's not a tactic that works well for all of the bosses, but even there, it works on a surprising number of them.



But when the darkness of the Catastrophe hit, a man in a dark cape offered his help to the Owrus.



The puzzles are fairly lackluster, too. Nothing in this game is all that difficult, and while that's pretty normal for the *Zelda* series, the puzzles in those games are at least a little more difficult than the ones found in *Oceanhorn*. There are fewer items to try, solutions are a bit too obvious, and since the dungeons tend to be a bit smaller than those found in *Zelda*, it's really just a matter of going the only way you can until something opens up in another direction. A big part of the problem is that in adopting virtually all of its tricks from *Zelda*, there's precious little puzzle-wise in *Oceanhorn* that we haven't seen and likely solved before.

Ultimately, that's probably the biggest issue I have with *Oceanhorn* when stacked against its source. Aside from adding in a few quirks like an experience system and achievements, it doesn't have a lot to say that we haven't heard from *Zelda* before. The story is different from the typical fare seen in Nintendo's series, but if we widen our field of view to RPGs at large, it's not doing anything all that novel. The item selection, general play mechanics, puzzles, art, gameplay flow, basic enemy types, and sidequests don't just feel inspired by *Zelda*. They feel directly lifted, and largely in the least exciting ways. There aren't any wild new items to find, no unusual puzzles, not even any clever boss fights. It's like a decent *Queen* cover band that only plays their radio singles. It's not just a problem that they're playing the songs differently and a little worse than the real band, it's that they're also limiting themselves to the safest and most frequently-heard hits.



But I feel bad doing that. It's *not* a fair comparison to make, no matter how tempting it is. Three youngish developers from a little company in Finland are not going to make a product on par with a big-budget AAA release from Nintendo EAD. That they made something at a quality level that invites that kind of comparison, even if it is almost entirely lacking originality, is an outstanding accomplishment. I have my issues with *Oceanhorn*, that much is probably clear if you've read this far, but I have a lot of fun playing it and can't help but admire the work that went into it. From a purely artistic sense, I wish Cornfox had done more to give the game its own identity, even though I know it made a lot more sales sense to play things the way they did. This kind of effort deserves to be known as more than just a good *Zelda* knock-off.

Anyway, that's what I've got to say about *Oceanhorn*. Great game, one that any action-RPG fan with an iOS device should own, but it also tears me apart if I think about it too much. Unfortunately, that's exactly the point of the **RPG Reload**. What do you all think of *Oceanhorn*? I want to know, so please comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or sent a tweet to me at [@RPGReload](#). As for me, I'll be back next week with another RPG

adventure. Thanks for reading!

**Next Week's Reload:** *Fall Of Angels HD* ([\\$2.99](#))